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 Poetry
A Magazine of Verse

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PIANISSIMO

An Intermezzo

For Bee Knudsen

*T*WO elderly gentlemen, in clothes even older than themselves, are just sitting down—with the outward aid of crooked canes and the inward support of sighs—on what is presumably a park bench, shaded by mountain laurels, with a swan-pond for a background. The men also carry the venerable pipes of tradition: in this case, heavily crusted corn-cobs. Their speech, very slow and gentle, gives them the sound of impersonal instruments improvising a harmless duo: prosaic music blown into the air at the end of smoke spirals, the re-lighting of pipes necessarily frequent. The only apparent difference between them, traceable perhaps to the unconscious bias of habitual meditation and perpetual comparison of ideas, has reduced itself to a slight wagging of the head on the part of the one as opposed to a slight nodding on

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the part of the other. Speech and movement coincide almost as caressingly as the effect produced by lips brushing wood-instruments.

Henry: Nay, but I insist
that the quick sharp touches the rain
and slower titillation the sun
put upon those flowers we saw
have in them the same heedless passion,
heedless of all save the self,
which envelops unconscious adolescence.
That isn't the type of caress I'm seeking.

Hodge: Those flowers were pale indeed
with a suggestion of pink and beginning of blue!

Henry: Early degrees of coloration
solely indicative of the mood
of self-interest of rain and of sun;
alternately shaping something,
like a left hand and right
of one and the same conjurer
reproducing his own vague image:
the flower somehow a captive,
clay just as we are,
subject to the next modulation
towards the next helpless state of being.
I've had my share and enough
of such no longer magical passes.

Hodge: Nearer to red and closer to purple!

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Henry: That is the type of caress
which has made of what I was
the droning instrument I am,
played upon in the one tonality
of a careless self-love so long
that the grave itself
will simply be the final effort
of the same somebody using me
to express himself in a minor cadence—
his little alas but a sigh
that his composition closed so shabbily.

Hodge: And still you cannot recall,
stubborn lad that you are,
a single variation, a dissonance, a brève?

Henry: Neither can you, Hodge,
with your eye pointing forward!

Hodge: Let us try just once more again—

Henry: Folk-song of the hopeful!—

Hodge: And perhaps—

Henry: *Da capo* of the hopeless!

Hodge: Possibly the shade of this laurel,
itself the design of accident,
angle of sun and of tree
meeting, rounding, spreading,
will quiet your melancholy,
and some quaint caress have room to stir,
your memory mislaid?

Henry: Memory is a cupboard

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I have gone to myriad times
and have returned the one time always
with relics so tedious
I find them heavier than boulders.
Since you who persist must try once again,
pray, take down the future if you can.

Hodge: Let us then sit here and wait,
and the strange, the new, may yet transpire.

Henry: You nod your head and I wag mine,
that is the difference between us:
you have verticals left in you,
I am all horizontal.

Hodge: But we are breathed into moving
in accordance with the odd,
delicately reciprocal nuance
of our one and the same—

Henry: Bassoonist!—

Hodge: You dub him lugubriously!—

Henry: Accurately!—

Hodge: Henry!

[*Henry looks at Hodge. Hodge smiles. They smoke in
silence. Hodge points with his pipe-stem.*]

Hodge: That swan,
a white interrogation
embracing the water,
and being embraced in response—

Henry: Their eyes reflecting each other,
their bodies displacing—

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Hodge: That swallow cleaving the air,
trusting his wings to the waves of ether—

Henry: And the air trusting him
with room in her body,
relinquishing just enough space
for him to fit himself into—

Hodge: Or the worm underground,
digging cylinder channels—

Henry: And the earth undulating
to the pressure of excavation—

Hodge: Caresses like these, simple Henry—

Henry: Caresses like those, simpler Hodge,
have been clapped in my ear
by your credulous tongue
with such affectionate fortitude,
I'm a bell attacked by echoes
each time the sea moves.

[*Hodge looks at Henry and wags his head. Henry nods and smiles. Hodge turns away.*]

Henry: You also remind me of evergreens
refusing to acknowledge the seasons,
or unable to distinguish
between white flowers and snow.
You're as old and as young as romance.

Hodge: It's you who fall redundant,
you who fondle the rondo—
why not have done and call me senile?

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Henry: Senility is a sling
invented by cynical youths
who envy and would rob
the old of their possessions.

Hodge: You admit possessions?—
you contradict yourself?—

Henry: My property
comprises the realization,
stripped bare of hope or hypothesis,
that I own neither things nor persons;
least of all these, myself.
Nor am I longer deluded
with even the thought of touching
a body that pirate youth would filch,
who cannot rid his blood of desire.

Hodge: Then you must be that youth,
since you crave—

Henry: A type of caress?

Hodge: How do you wriggle out of that?

[*Hodge and Henry relight their pipes.*]

Henry: The type of caress I crave
must have in it
no desire to make of me
aught of what it would make of itself.
It must not say to me,
“I would make of you
more of me and less of you—”

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Hodge: Nor must it lure me,
by virtue of the bounty
of its body or the beauty
of its mind, to sigh,
“I would make of myself
more of you and less of me—”

Henry: I have had enough
of such juxtaposition—

Hodge: The immortal dialogue
of life and of death—

Henry: The recurrent symbol
of being and reflection—

Hodge: Of Narcissus
in love with himself—

Henry: Of God chanting a solo
to comfort His loneliness,
like an aged woman
knitting things for her children to wear
in her own image,
singing: “This is I,
and you are mine;
so wear my love as I love you.”

[*Pause. Henry lowers his head; so does Hodge.*]

Henry: If it is
God who fashioned me,
is it He
who asks, is He pleased?

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Hodge: Does my prayer,
which is His
if I'm His,
move or leave Him unmoved?

Henry: It is He
who lifts these questions,
or am I
to blame for thinking?

Hodge: If He,
noticing me
at last, notices Himself—
what's wrong with Him?

Henry: Really,
I'm not regretting
what I am,
nor begging, make me better.

Hodge: If I
have a sense of the droll,
surely
He has one too.

Henry: Asking Himself
to pray to Himself—
that is,
if He fashioned me?

[*Pause.*]

Hodge: Does it comfort you?

Henry: A little—for a moment.

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Hodge: Farther than last time?

Henry: A tiny stretch beyond.

[They raise their heads.]

Hodge: It's still a wee mad melody—

Henry: Innocent blasphemy
of the inner
frantic to grow to the outer,
to the more than itself—
the molecule a star,
the instant universal—
the me a trifle closer
to the you that gave it life.

Hodge: You recall how you composed it
years before we came to this?

Henry: As clearly as a brook,
and you sitting in its midst
like a pebble nodding assent
to the foolish reckless sound—

Hodge: Strange that we return to it!

Henry: Stranger still, we do naught but return!

[They continue smoking, Henry wagging, Hodge nodding.]

Hodge: Did you feel something stir?

Henry: Only another breeze—

Hodge: But didn't you see that cloud alter?—

Henry: The cause of the breeze—

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Hodge: Caressing us?—

Henry: Leaving me colder—

Hodge: Me warmer.

Henry: When the temperature in a room
is higher or lower than normal,
it is needful to open
or to shut a window—

Hodge: Which?

Henry: A west wind
urges me to shut a west window,
an east an east—that is all.
And I have known the same touch
to thrill and leave me cold,
and this monotonous heart of mine
to open and close in childish acquiescence—

Hodge: Button your coat about you—

Henry: We have no business
gadding around in the spring—
it was you who suggested it,
you with your nodding.

Hodge: It was the look of the world outdoors—
let us try another place,
or wander back home again.

Henry: And try just once more?

Hodge: Perhaps, providing—

Henry: We are like twin philosophers,
phrase-practitioners
who argue with slender

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tapering sensitive beards
which each lays persuasive hold of,
pulling first the one the other
and the other the one in turn,
till their heads collide and rebound
back to the starting-point,
with *if* or *suppose* or *providing* or *but*—

Hodge: But you have more wisdom?—

Henry: And you more happiness!
And thus the moon pursues the sun!

[*Hodge touches Henry.*]

Hodge: Are you angry?

Henry: Angry with you?

[*They eye each other, smile faintly, and turn away.*]

Henry: Your talk comes to me from afar,
though you are only an elbow away;
like rain making an arid soil
intimate with better things.
They, perhaps, are what are left me.

Hodge: If I say, I love thee,
in some guise or other—
this is more than talk?

Henry: The gesture of a lonely spirit
reaching out to a lonelier.

[*They methodically shake out their pipes and stuff them*

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away. Hodge nudges Henry ever so gently. Henry tries to rise. Hodge has to aid him. They move away haltingly, Hodge's stick tapping a little in advance of Henry's, and Hodge's arm through Henry's. Henry tries to shake off Hodge, but the latter persists. They move slightly faster.]

Henry: Was it yesterday I said—

Hodge: What, Henry?

Henry: I love thee?

Hodge: In actual words, nay—
but the day before—

Henry: Then let them have been said
yesterday as well,
for if words ever fail me—

Hodge: They never fail you.

Henry: Nor you, Hodge.

[They nod together.]

Henry: Let us go silently
the next pace or two—

Hodge: As you will—

Henry: And let other things speak—

Hodge: For us?

Henry: For themselves.

[They disappear, Hodge's stick still sounding in advance of Henry's.]

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